

Transparency and accountability in fragile and conflict-affected settings

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Question

What is known about the impact and effectiveness of transparency and accountability initiatives (TAIs) in fragile and conflict affected settings? What knowledge gaps exist for future research?

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1. Overview

Over the past 10 years, there have been numerous meta-studies and syntheses of the impact and effectiveness of transparency and accountability initiatives (TAIs), many of which attempt to incrementally add value to the existing evidence base or offer new perspectives on existing conclusions. These studies are almost unanimous in their conclusion that little of practical or replicable value is known, much less in fragile and conflict-affected situations.

Much of the literature on TAIs focuses on the effectiveness of implementation, rather than on their broader impact. There are few comparative studies that look across various cases and which allow for general conclusions to be extrapolated. Furthermore, most TAIs are based on rather optimistic assumptions about what they are able to achieve, rather than on well-developed theories of change, and few studies pay sufficient attention to context, which is crucial for understanding how such initiatives play out in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

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Nevertheless, there have been some recent efforts to make sense of the contextual factors which favour or hinder successful TAIs and which are the focus of this helpdesk report. The few studies which address fragile and conflict-affected settings specifically (Grandvoinnet et al 2015; Fooks 2013; Schouten 2011) are given special attention.

Successful implementation of TAIs is increasingly understood to depend on the interaction of “micro” local-level factors with a number of “macro” contextual dimensions, including the capacity of civil society, the will of political society, inter-elite relations, state-society relations, intra-society relations and global dimensions. More specifically, these “macro” factors include:

- The **level of democratization** or space for accountability demands to be made
- The **broader political economy**, including incentives and sanctions for public officials
- The **degree of ‘political will’** for accountability.
- The **persistence of mobilisation** over time
- The extent to which TAIs are **vertically integrated**
- The **quality and strength of pro-accountability networks** across state and society.
- The **capacity of citizens and civil society organizations** to mobilize for greater accountability
- The **degree of authority and credibility** of lead agencies in TAIs
- The extent to which the issues TAIs seek to address are perceived as **relevant and actionable**

An appreciation of these contextual dimensions suggests that TAIs in fragile and conflict-affected settings need to focus on strengthening the social contract between state and society. In theory, such an approach can contribute to greater state legitimacy, strengthen citizen’s understanding of citizenship, promote political inclusion, provide interfaces between citizens and governments, build intra-community trust, and build competencies and skills that are necessary for organizing collective action.

In order to realise this potential, it has been suggested that TAIs in fragile and conflict-affected settings need to pay particular attention to:

- **Clarity of outcomes:** There is an increasing appreciation of the need to better articulate and unpack what TAIs in fragile and conflict-affected settings aim to achieve, and how different outcomes are expected to interact. For example, emerging evidence suggests that the *process* through which services are delivered may be at least as important as, if not more important than, service *outcomes* in building state legitimacy.
- **The role of intermediaries:** Effective intermediaries need to be able to forge shared agendas, develop social bonds across identity groups, and reinforce a sense of citizenship. Identification of appropriate intermediaries requires a careful examination of existing social networks.
- **Inclusion of local elites:** While elites may capture the gains from TAIs to further their own interests, under the right conditions they can also use them for the greater benefit of the community. There is therefore a need to work with local elites in a way which supports them to include the poor.
- **The power of information and informal networks:** TAIs should focus on building inclusive information flows that reach all groups within society and avoid the perception of

favouritism to particular groups. Equally important is to recognise the role of informal networks and relationships in how information is shaped.

- **Balancing incentives and sanctions:** TAIs need to carefully consider the relative weight given to sanctions and the trade-offs between forward and backward-looking accountability efforts.
- **Supporting grievance mechanisms:** recent evidence suggests that the mere presence of grievance mechanisms, even when not actively used, can help to strengthen the legitimacy of the state in the eyes of citizens.

In order to strengthen the evidence based on the contextual factors which influence the impact and effectiveness of TAIs, a number of areas for future of research have been suggested including:

- Applying **new research methods** to better understand non-linear change and complexity
- Conducting **more comparative research** across contexts and initiatives
- Exploring **incentives for collective action** on transparency and accountability with an explicit focus on power and politics
- Understanding better how to build **cross-cutting accountability coalitions**
- Understanding **global-local linkages** and the roles of a more diverse set of non-state actors, including the private sector and aid donors
- Understanding the role of **new technologies** for political action.

2. Snapshot of evidence on TAIs¹ generally

Evidence base

Evidence to assess the effectiveness and impact of TAIs is generated through a range of research approaches including qualitative case studies, randomised controlled trials (RCTs), ex-post quantitative/qualitative evaluations, and participatory evaluations, with each approach having advantages and disadvantages. For example, participatory evaluations are often critiqued for bias in reporting successes, RCTs while statistically sound, can overlook the question of causality, and case studies are often criticised for being more descriptive than analytical (Joshi 2013).

Much of the literature on TAIs focuses on the effectiveness of implementation of initiatives, rather than their broader impact. Effectiveness is understood to mean the extent to which initiatives are effective in achieving stated goals, whereas impact refers to the degree to which initiatives contribute to longer term, 'second-order' goals (McGee and Gaventa 2010). Those studies which do explicitly assess impact tend to focus on single cases. There are few comparative studies that look across various cases to discuss the degree of effective implementation and explain it, or that allow for general conclusions to be extrapolated. Positive evidence in one setting is often not

¹ For the purposes of this helpdesk research report, the terms transparency and accountability Interventions (TAIs) and social accountability (SA) interventions are used interchangeably. Within these categories, specific interventions may include: complaints mechanisms, public information/ transparency campaigns, citizen report cards and score cards, community monitoring and social audits, participatory budgeting, public expenditure monitoring, participatory auditing, right to know campaigns, strengthening the media, new legislative frameworks and voluntary disclosure mechanisms, revenue transparency, aid transparency (McGee and Gaventa 2010).

corroborated – and sometimes even contradicted - by findings in another setting, even where similar methods have been used (McGee and Gaventa 2010; O’Meally 2013).

Furthermore, most TAIs are based on rather optimistic assumptions about what they are able to achieve, rather than on well-developed theories of change which offer plausible explanations for how the desired changes are likely to occur. Purported impacts include: improvements in the quality of governance, increased development effectiveness, empowerment of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, greater openness and access to information (sometimes regarded as an end in itself), and greater accountability to citizens (McGee and Gaventa 2010; Joshi 2013). Yet the sequence of steps necessary for TAIs to be successful, their durability, and their interaction with other factors, are frequently poorly understood (McGee and Gaventa 2010; Joshi 2013).

For example, growing evidence exists that transparency only leads to greater accountability in interaction with other factors. As noted by McGee and Gaventa (2010), “transparency initiatives which ‘mobilise the power of shame’ have no purchase on the shameless”. Another common assumption is that making information available will stimulate action on the part of a broad range of stakeholders, when in fact little may be known about the incentives and constraints of collective action to use this information. And finally, many assumptions often assume homogeneous categories of actors, such as ‘states’, ‘citizens’, ‘media’, ‘civil society’, without looking at critical differences of position, power, behaviours and incentives within them (McGee and Gaventa 2010).

Crucially for the case of fragile and conflict-affected settings, few studies pay much attention to context (Bukenya et al 2012). Indeed, it is particularly difficult to disentangle the “context” from the “intervention” and almost impossible to exhaustively consider the enormous range of potential contextual variations that one might face on an everyday basis (O’Meally 2013). In many cases, accountability initiatives are part of a larger package of strategies that citizen groups use to gain better services, making the task of isolating the impact of TAIs even more difficult (Joshi 2013).

Notwithstanding these challenges, some useful approaches are currently being promoted to assess the effectiveness and impact of TAIs, most notably ‘theory-based’ approaches which use both quantitative and in-depth qualitative methods to evaluate outcomes within an over-arching political economy analysis (Bukenya et al 2012; McGee and Gaventa 2010). The final section of this report offers some suggestions for promising areas for future research in this area.

Evidence of impact

Overall, the available evidence suggests that TAIs are more successful in terms of effectiveness - in that they are often well implemented and reach first order goals such as the use of complaint mechanisms or the exposure of corruption - than in terms of impact, such as improving responsiveness of providers or of services themselves. Initiatives targeted at exposing corruption have been fairly successful, whereas interventions intended to improve service outcomes and responsiveness have not always had the intended impacts. In particular, there is some evidence that complaints channels for service users may be successful, particularly for women. Impact is also more likely through forms of collective action rather than individual action. In particular, collective accountability is more likely to result in reduced corruption and increased empowerment of citizens (Joshi 2013).

Emerging research also suggests that participation of citizen groups in policy formation processes ‘upstream’, will increase the likelihood of their engagement TAls ‘downstream’ (Joshi 2013), with the most tangible development impacts being witnessed in the areas of education, participatory budgeting and water management, in countries with at least nominally responsive elected governments (Fox 2014).

Interventions which manage to catalyse collaboration between state and non-state actors, who are deemed credible and legitimate, and which manage to generate and disseminate high-quality and salient forms of information, are particularly associated with success in terms of improved governance and increased levels of citizen empowerment (Bukonya et al 2012). Exclusively demand-side TAls - what Fox (2014) describes as “tactical” approaches - tend to have less impact than “strategic” approaches. The latter combine information access with support for enabling environments for collective action that can scale up and coordinate with governmental reforms to encourage public sector responsiveness to citizen demands (Fox 2014). Thus, it is argued, “strategies of mutually empowering coalitions of pro-accountability actors in both state and society can trigger the virtuous circles of mutual empowerment that are needed to break out of ‘low-accountability traps’” (Fox 2014).

3. Factors which enable or constrain TAl effectiveness

Despite the limits of the evidence, and while recognising the challenges inherent in transposing lessons across different settings, there have been some recent attempts to tease out the contextual factors which influence the impact of TAls. In a broad sense, these involve an appreciation of transparency and accountability as more than formal mechanisms or instruments, but also as relationships involving power dynamics across state and society, and as patterns of attitudes and behaviours (McGee and Gaventa 2010). These supply and demand side conditions include:

- **The level of democratization and the presence of civic space for accountability demands** to be made (McGee and Gaventa 2010)
- **The broader political economy**, including enabling legal frameworks, incentives and sanctions which affect the behaviours of public officials (McGee and Gaventa 2010; Fox 2014), and the nature of the political settlement and inter-elite relations. This includes capacity for positive institutional responses, e.g. responding to citizen recommendations, investigating complaints and grievances, conducting inspections and audits, and changing public sector incentive structures to discourage abuse (Fox 2014; Joshi 2013).
- **The degree of ‘political will’ for accountability.** In particular, the extent to which TAls build on domestic pressures for change, support the capacity of the state to respond to voice, and influence service provider incentives is seen as key (McGee and Gaventa 2010; Joshi 2013; Fox 2014; O’Meally 2013), as is the need to balance the tension between demanding accountability and engaging with providers to understand the constraints they face. Often successful initiatives have constructive engagement and dialogue between providers and users about potential reforms as part of the process of demanding accountability (Joshi 2013).
- **The persistence of mobilisation over time** also contributes to effective influence, suggesting it may be important to consider social accountability as the outcome of longer-term and iterative processes of bargaining between social and state actors, rather than one-off interventions (Joshi & Houtzager, 2012).

- **The extent to which TAIs, and civil society action more generally, are vertically integrated** (Fox 2014; Bukenya et al 2012). This includes the degree to which accountability, transparency and participation initiatives are embedded throughout all stages of the policy cycle, from how decisions are made to whether and how they are implemented (McGee and Gaventa 2010). Obstacles to successful TAIs are often dependent on the interplay between vertical, horizontal and diagonal accountability relationships. For example, in many contexts, service delivery is highly politicised and public oversight agencies and access to social programmes are controlled by political leaders, leading to “vicious circles of self-reproducing low-accountability traps” at both national and sub-national levels (Fox 2014).
- **The quality and strength of pro-accountability networks** across state and society. It is often these networks which account for success rather than the characteristics of individual actors (O’Meally 2013). According to one meta-analysis of TAIs, more than a third of studies reviewed found that higher levels of state-civil society collaboration within accountability mechanisms translated into greater success (Hickey and King 2016). Even within contentious actions, which might be expected to involve adversarial relationships between the state and citizens, receptivity to civil society advocacy among political actors and effective interfaces for engagement were important to success (Hickey and King 2016). Alliances between interest groups afford the legitimacy necessary to get the attention of decision-makers, while alliances with elite political and legal networks have assisted communities to use legal challenge and constitutional frameworks (Bukenya et al 2012).
- **The capacity of citizens and civil society organizations** to access and use information, to mobilize for greater accountability (McGee and Gaventa 2010), and to scale up representation of citizen voice, including mass membership organisations (Fox 2014). An active and independent media also seems to be a critical part of several of the successful cases (Joshi 2013).
- **The degree of authority and credibility of lead agencies** in TAIs, their ability to mobilise support spanning the state-society divide, and their employment of a wide range of strategies (Bukenya et al 2012; Hickey and King 2016). One meta-study reports that more than a third of studies reviewed found the credibility of lead actors to be critical to success and this was particularly significant within transparency initiatives and contentious actions (Hickey and King 2016).
- **The extent to which information disseminated through TAIs, and the problems and issues TAIs seek to address, are perceived as relevant and actionable** by stakeholders (Fox 2014; O’Meally 2013). Vital resources such as education, livelihoods, access to land and access to life-saving medicines catalyse strong reactions from citizens (Hickey and King 2016). This suggests that there might be a stronger ‘social contract’ around some issues and public goods than others, in the sense that actors on both sides of the equation perceive that there is a duty for public authorities to respond (Bukenya et al 2012; Hickey and King 2016).

In view of these findings, researchers have begun to elaborate a set of broader conceptual framings through which to analyse the contextual factors which have an impact on TAIs. Bukenya et al (2012) identify four institutional spheres which are critical to understanding the contextual factors which influence TAI implementation:

- **Political society:** The character of political society is critical to the success of social accountability interventions, particularly state functionaries (e.g. elected officials willing to

hold bureaucrats to account) and the role played by formal and informal political institutions (e.g. political parties, patronage).

- **Civil society:** The capacity and commitment to promoting social accountability within civil society is also critical, not only in terms of placing demands on the state, but more importantly in the sense of building progressive coalitions both within civil society and between civil and political society.
- **Inequality and exclusion:** The capacity of citizens to engage in social accountability initiatives and to hold public officials to account are closely shaped by power relations, involving inequality and exclusion along multiple lines (e.g. education, class, ethnicity, caste).
- **State-society relations:** The capacity and commitment to deliver accountable forms of governance is ultimately dependent on the character of state-society relations. This can be conceptualized in terms of the presence and character of a 'social contract' around specific public goods, which can be strengthened over time through state-society bargaining.

In a similar vein, O'Meally (2013) presents a schematic summary of the key contextual domains and sub-dimensions that influence TAIs:

Contextual domains	Key domain sub-dimensions
Civil Society	<p>Technical and organizational capacity</p> <p>Capacity to build alliances across society</p> <p>Capacity to build alliances/networks with the state</p> <p>Authority, legitimacy, and credibility of civil society with citizens and state actors</p> <p>Willingness of civil society to challenge accountability status quo</p> <p>Capacity of citizens to engage in social accountability</p> <p>Willingness of citizens to engage in social accountability</p>
Political Society	<p>Willingness of political elites to respond to and foster social accountability</p> <p>Willingness of state bureaucrats to respond to and foster social accountability</p> <p>State and political elite capacity to respond to social accountability</p> <p>Democratization and the civil society enabling environment</p> <p>The nature of the rule of law</p> <p>The capacity and willingness of political parties to support social</p>

	accountability
Inter-Elite Relations	<p>The developmental nature of the political settlement</p> <p>The inclusiveness of the political settlement</p> <p>The organizational and political capabilities of the political settlement</p> <p>Elite ideas/norms of accountability underpinning the political settlement</p>
State-Society Relations	<p>The character and form of the social contract</p> <p>History of state–citizen bargaining (long- and short-term)</p> <p>State-society accountability and bridging mechanisms (formal and informal)</p> <p>The nature and depth of state-society pro-accountability networks</p>
Intra-Society Relations	<p>Inequality</p> <p>Social exclusion and fragmentation</p>
Global Dimensions	<p>Donor-state relations</p> <p>International power-holder accountability</p> <p>International political and economic drivers</p>

Source: O’Meally 2013

Joshi (2014) complements these “macro” contextual factors with a set of “micro” or local factors that influence the extent to which social accountability initiatives are successful, even within otherwise broadly similar national contexts. These characteristics, which can then be analyzed in the context of specific interactions in specific situations, include:

- Information: Literacy/access; legitimacy/credibility of information
- Citizen action: Priorities; belief in efficacy of channel; sense of entitlements
- Official response: Public officials think citizens have legitimate grievances; public officials have capacity; public officials are motivated by public service; public officials care about their reputation; public officials have channels by which to influence higher levels.

Taken together these different perspectives offer a comprehensive set of contextual variables found to influence the impact of social accountability mechanisms. The following section discusses the implications of such contextual factors for TAIs in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

4. Implications for fragile and conflict-affected settings

Fragile and conflict-affected settings are characterised by social fragmentation, low levels of trust, and weak state capacity and/or legitimacy (Schouten 2011). They also often suffer from the simmering threat of violent conflict, and the actions and opportunities for engagement of the most vulnerable and marginalised are heavily influenced by fear and trauma. The state often lacks the ability to build inclusive political settlements and mediate relations across various groups (Grandvoinnet et al 2015), and it is not uncommon to find that informal networks and sources of information take precedence over formal ones. Civil society may lack leadership and have limited access to information or means of communication. Under these circumstances, mobilising citizens or engaging them in formal accountability mechanisms may be risky, and can be viewed as a challenge to the state (Schouten, 2011).

Challenges and risks associated with TAIs in fragile and conflict-affected settings

McGee and Kroessschell (2013) identify the key factors which pose a challenge to external efforts to support accountability in fragile and conflict-affected settings, namely: the lack of local state–citizen interfaces at which constructive citizen engagement can occur, the operations of invisible power in ostensibly participatory spaces, deficient legislative frameworks, elite capture, political and administrative cultures that are not conducive to citizen engagement, the challenges of promoting accountability in sovereign states as foreign aid donors, and the difficulty of including the most marginalised. When considering these challenges, it is important to recognise the distinction between states characterised by very little authority or capacity and those that are authoritarian and experiencing ongoing conflict. This distinction will have important implications for which interventions are more likely to bear fruit and how they are designed. For example, in the latter case, the challenge of ongoing conflict and social fragmentation is often a critical factor which makes any steps towards accountability particularly problematic (Joshi, email communication 3 April 2017).

Another common feature of fragile and conflict-affected settings is that the social contract is in flux. The social contract refers to the agreement of citizens to submit to the authority of government in exchange for protection of their rights and access to services, security, and justice (Fooks 2013). But because of lingering unaddressed grievances, state-society relations and the social contract in fragile and conflict-affected settings often mean different things to different groups and their conception and expectations of it will depend on how they perceive historical relations. In short, while certain groups of citizens may consider the state to be illegitimate and predatory, others may believe that it represents their interests (Grandvoinnet et al 2015).

Unintended consequences

The weaknesses of the social contract means that TAIs, if not approached sensitively, may cause a range of unintended negative consequences in fragile and conflict-affected settings. For example, if the process and impact of TAIs are perceived to exclude one or more groups, this can create or revive tensions within groups or between certain groups and the state. Interventions aimed at supporting certain actors and institutional reforms may also inadvertently lead to an overly powerful state and close off the space for citizen engagement (Grandvoinnet et al 2015). Furthermore, organisations participating in TAIs may be co-opted by the state or viewed

as agents of external forces. These risks are exacerbated where there are limited means for citizen protection and voice, high factionalism and weak security (Schouten 2011).

In many fragile and conflict-affected settings, externally promoted accountability carries inherent risks for local staff and CSOs, and citizen voice can be constrained by the fear factor (Fox 2014), as well as by the trauma resulting from violent conflict. Many TAIs are based on the - often unfounded - assumption that participation has more benefits than costs, and that those targeted also perceive this to be the case, ignoring any fears of reprisals (Fox 2014; McGee and Kroessschell 2013). Yet local staff may be reluctant to work on accountability at too deep a level for fear of upsetting relationships with local government officials, and they may be dependent on elites for their project outcomes and therefore reluctant to risk alienating them. Challenging power relations between citizens and the state is a difficult and sensitive issue, especially when aid agency staff are dependent on good relations with local government officials. The delicate nature of aid relationships in unaccountable states may make the overt promotion of state or government accountability untenable or risk igniting conflicts (McGee and Kroessschell 2013). When this is the case, agencies may be forced to limit themselves to promoting transparency and 'soft' accountability measures, rather than 'hard' enforceability aspects (McGee and Kroessschell 2013).

The challenge of state capacity

Political actors in fragile and conflict-affected settings are often weak and incapable of fulfilling their roles. In some cases, patronage networks may have effectively supplanted politicians, while the state may not have full or exclusive authority over its territory and is competing with other groups for legitimacy. Such conditions create a challenging context for TAIs, as they make identification of state responsibilities unclear, and capacity to respond to citizen demands inadequate (Grandvoinnet et al 2015).

Such conditions are also not conducive to an environment in which enforcement or sanctions, which are critical to exacting accountability, can be effective. In systems with weak state structures, the space for the imposition of sanctions is under constant negotiation. Enforcement and answerability is likely to be interpreted and acted on differently in each social accountability relationship (Grandvoinnet et al 2015), leading to inconsistent application of sanctions, which can itself further fuel grievances.

A further consequence of weak state capacity which has important implications for TAIs is limited accessibility to accurate and unbiased information, either because the infrastructure needed to disseminate information is lacking or limited to certain areas and groups, or because vertical flows of information are biased and hierarchical, reflecting a one-sided interpretation of history. In such circumstances, citizens may be unable to see beyond the confines of their own identity groups or to appreciate different perspectives. This phenomenon raises issues of trust, where citizens are wary of information sources that do not conform to their views, or are not deemed credible (Grandvoinnet et al 2015). Furthermore, a common phenomenon in states with weak administrative capacity is that data collection and management is inconsistent across different departments and localities, which makes it challenging to accurately assess effectiveness of government services (Schouten 2011).

The challenge of civil society capacity

Fragile and conflict-affected settings are also often lacking in capable CSOs that can support TAIs and facilitate collective action. Fear, insecurity, repression, displacement, and violence may result in feelings of powerlessness, marginalization, and humiliation among citizens undermining the requirements for citizen engagement, namely a sense of citizenship, aspiration, the will and capacity to interact, and the experience and skills to use voice. Where strong social relationships do exist, they are likely to be concentrated within specific ethnic, religious or other identity groups, rather than across groups. As a result, even where it does exist, there is less chance that citizen participation will be meaningful, and existing inequalities and exclusion risk being perpetuated. In many fragile and conflict-affected settings, patterns of exclusion are deliberate, based on historical legacies and embedded in organizations. In many cases, citizens have internalized their own status as “marginalized.” Thus cultural norms that limit the opportunities for citizens to participate in civic affairs may also play a role, compounded by a lack of trust (Grandvoinnet et al 2015).

The challenge of state-society relations

CSOs in fragile and conflict-affected settings may become stuck in a confrontational stance vis-à-vis the state, due to a history of antagonistic relations. At the same time, the state may be distrustful of certain groups of CSOs (e.g. CSOs that receive foreign funding), perceiving them as challenging its authority and constraining its ability to perform its functions. The government may fear that opening up civil society space may incentivize citizens to lodge contentious action toward the state, which can threaten the very foundations of the state, especially where political settlements are fragile. In such contexts, the interfaces at the local level to allow constructive citizen engagement with the state are often missing or their legitimacy contested across groups. They may, in fact, be systematically biased in favour of certain groups and inaccessible to some (Grandvoinnet et al 2015).

The challenge of multiple and fragmented accountability relationships

In fragile and conflict-affected settings, there are often multiple and fragmented sources of authority, including armed groups, faith leaders and/or traditional authorities. As a result, accountability relationships are not simply between states and citizens, but also between citizens and informal power-holders, and between informal power-holders and the state. The challenge for external interventions is to simultaneously strengthen accountability between these other actors and citizens in the short run, especially in places where they are providing services and raising revenues and the formal state has little presence, whilst working towards establishing accountability between citizens and the formal state in the long run (Joshi, email communication, 3 April 2017).

Addressing the challenges for TAIs in fragile and conflict-affected settings

In the face of such challenges, it is important to assess the trade-offs between the importance of citizen engagement and the high risks that TAIs will fail given “macro” contextual constraints. TAIs in fragile and conflict-affected settings need to be adapted and adjusted constantly to the complex and fluid local environment. In this sense, it has been suggested that a “problem-driven iteration adaptation” approach might be a suitable design principle for such initiatives (Woolcock 2014). Moreover, TAIs may need to take a more opportunistic approach of responding to

“windows of opportunity”, starting small and proceeding gradually and iteratively, given the instability within political society, civil society, and state-society relations. (Grandvoinnet et al 2015).

Some experts argue that strengthening citizen-state engagement in fragile and conflict-affected settings requires a triangulated approach that simultaneously builds voice and “listening capacity” within the media, government and civil society (von Kaltenborn-Stachau, 2008). In addition, recent experience suggests that focussing on strengthening the social contract and emphasising the role of all parties and their collective responsibility for problem-solving can be constructive in improving accountability in such contexts (Fooks, 2013). Developing a social contract in a fragile context requires ongoing explicit and implicit negotiation between different interest groups and a range of formal and informal powerholders, subject to renegotiation and changes in circumstances. This can help prevent a negative backlash from a state with authoritarian tendencies which may be nervous about the role of civil society, and give each party a realistic expectation of what the other can do (Fooks 2013).

In theory, TAIs can support the social contract between state and citizens in a number of ways, including by:

- by encouraging dialogue and engagement between the state and society at various levels, thus contributing to greater state legitimacy
- strengthening citizen’s understanding of citizenship and the norms of inclusion
- promoting political inclusion, thereby reducing perceptions of injustice and strengthening state legitimacy
- providing interfaces between citizens and governments, where state officials can account for themselves
- building intra-community trust and enabling collective action
- building competencies and skills that are necessary for organizing collective action (Grandvoinnet et al 2015).

However, in order for this potential to be realised, the following factors are considered key:

Clarity of outcomes

There is an increasing appreciation of the need to better articulate and unpack what TAIs in fragile and conflict-affected settings aim to achieve, and how (e.g. service delivery improvements, reduction in levels of corruption, more responsive public officials, greater intra-community and state-society trust). Whilst these outcomes are often intertwined, a better understanding of which outcomes are most important in such settings is critical. For example, the recent evidence on service delivery and state-building in fragile and conflict-affected settings, suggests – contrary to perceived wisdom – that effective service delivery does not necessarily contribute to state legitimacy in newly formed states. Instead, such outcomes depend on a range of variables including the expectations of citizens, norms of fairness and justice and the nature of the service itself (McCloughlin 2015). Moreover, the evidence also suggests that the *process* through which services are delivered may be at least as important as, if not more important than, service *outcomes* in building state legitimacy (see also section on “Supporting grievance mechanisms” below).

The role of intermediaries

Where traditions of self-organization are weak, and freedom of association is limited, the role of intermediaries is crucial to facilitate two-way communication and bridge cultural and power gaps (Fox 2014; Grandvoinnet 2015). Effective intermediaries need to be able to forge shared agendas in a deeply divided society, develop social bonds cutting across identity groups, and create and reinforce a sense of citizenship. In conflict situations, such intermediaries may be targeted specifically because of their ability to encourage or generate collective action. Research suggests, however, that the experience of conflict can also result in political and social empowerment, enabling some community members to act as effective mobilizers (Grandvoinnet et al 2015).

Civil society organizations, traditional organizations, and media institutions often serve as mobilizers for TAIs, but in fragile and conflict-affected settings, it is essential to analyse social networks carefully to identify legitimate intermediaries above and beyond their technical capacities to mobilize citizens (Grandvoinnet et al 2015). In post-war societies, CSOs or community-based groups who served the public good before and throughout the war may be well placed to build and train networks of change agents, with careful consideration of political and economic incentives (Schouten 2011). Local organizations and community-based organizations are, by necessity, particularly strong in some fragile contexts and can play an important role in strengthening cultures of citizenship. Traditional and customary institutions can serve as alternatives to CSOs and can potentially be used to anchor TAIs. However, the reliance on traditional institutions has its limitations. First, in some cases, these institutions may lack legitimacy, and they may not be fully representative of society. Second, reliance on traditional institutions may perpetuate existing patterns of exclusion and reinforce a strong in-group identity, while harming bridging ties. Third, reliance on traditional institutions may lead to widespread distrust of initiatives aimed at strengthening the role of the state (Grandvoinnet et al 2015).

Furthermore, it is also critical to recognise that civil society – far from being a homogeneous and neutral actor in society–state relations – is not always the most influential channel for reform processes (Rocha Menocal and Sharma, 2008). The risk that CSO intermediation can intercept accountability relationships which link citizens directly to the state needs careful consideration. Nevertheless, one study found that when an aid agency strengthens local CSOs and intermediary organisations to promote accountability in ways that actively seek partnership with and involvement of the local-level state, the intermediary works as a bridge, helping to construct an interface between the local level state and citizens, rather than taking the place of the state (McGee and Kroesschell 2013). This was found to be the case in a number of donor-led interventions in Bangladesh, Mozambique and Nepal (see country examples below).

Inclusion of local power-holders

In a context where the poor depend on elites for services, protection and connections, there is a risk of elite capture of the benefits of public services and aid investments and the spaces for participation. Elites often show rent-seeking behaviour, capturing gains in terms of skill development and connections to CSOs and international agencies, at the expense poorer and more marginalised members of the community. However, while elites can and do use these social political and economic assets in their own interest, they can also use them for the greater benefit of the community (see Bangladesh case below). The inclusion of the local elite in TAIs is relatively easy for local government officials and CSOs, whereas the inclusion of the poor and

marginalised is difficult, especially if they themselves believe that they do not have the capacities to be involved in local governance processes. McGee and Kroessschell (2013) suggest that there is therefore a need to work with the elite and support them to include the poor, i.e. 'co-opt the elite' or 'capture the elite', while challenging their individual power.

The power of information and informal networks

Accessing, (re-)producing and disseminating accurate and neutral information essential for rebuilding trust between citizens and the state is particularly challenging in fragile and conflict-affected settings. TAIs may enable the (re)building of an 'information ecosystem' that emphasizes inclusive information flows that reach all groups within society, as long as this is handled in sensitive and transparent ways. Transparency, both in terms of production and dissemination of information, is essential for legitimacy and to enable citizens to have an understanding of how decisions are reached. But this transparency needs to be managed carefully to avoid perceptions of elite capture or favouritism toward particular individuals or groups. Information must be disseminated as widely as possible to all groups in society. To do so, knowing the different media on which citizens rely for information is essential, as is disseminating information in different formats to reach different audiences (Grandvoinnet et al. 2015).

Equally important is to recognise the role of informal networks and relationships in how information is shaped. In certain cases, rumours and informal information may be more trusted than that emanating from official sources. Thus, findings from TAIs may have more traction if they are conveyed informally. The dominance of the informal has important implications for how TAIs may be structured and measured, and how they might have most impact (Joshi, email communication 3 April 2017).

Balancing incentives and sanctions

Consideration needs to be given to the relative weight given to sanctions when implementing TAIs in fragile and conflict-affected settings. An emphasis on consequences (sanctions, redress, compensation) can change the mix of perceived incentives that influence behaviour, yet in many fragile and conflict-affected settings pro-accountability actors with very limited political space and resources often face stark trade-offs in terms of their relative emphasis on incentives vs sanctions. The political dynamics of these possible trade-offs between forward and backward-looking accountability efforts – and between more collaborative vs more confrontational approaches – have rarely been explicitly addressed in the research literature on TAIs. Yet those promoting accountability in fragile and conflict-affected settings are likely to be quite strategic about investing their limited political capital primarily in forward- looking, preventative approaches (Fox 2014).

Supporting grievance mechanisms

One study found that the existence of grievance mechanisms and complaints procedures within public services is significantly related to more positive perceptions of the government (Mallet et al 2015), which can help to strengthen the legitimacy of the state in the eyes of citizens. The study suggests that actually using the grievance mechanisms does not appear to be a necessary condition for this relationship to hold; their simple presence seems to matter in and of itself. The study also finds a strong correlation between levels of civic participation vis-à-vis service delivery

and perceptions of the government: when respondents attended a community meeting about services (or knew of such a meeting), or when they were consulted about services in their community, they were more likely to think better of the government. These findings suggest that allowing citizens to 'see' their system of government at work in a tangible manner appears to influence the way people think about their state. Thus, promoting state legitimacy may perhaps be less about the quality of services themselves, and more about the kinds of mechanisms that promote engagement and exchange between citizens and the state (Mallet et al 2015).

5. Selected country examples²

Evidence of the impact of TAIs in fragile and conflict-affected settings is particularly limited and inconclusive. Nevertheless, some empirical studies document the positive impact that TAIs have had on various aspects of the state-society relationship in such contexts. While not all the interventions presented below have greater social accountability as their explicit goal, they do aim to promote interaction among citizens in one way or another, and can therefore be considered relevant here. A note of caution is that, as discussed above, the intended outcomes (and interaction between outcomes) expected to be delivered by such interventions needs particularly careful consideration in fragile and conflict-affected settings:

Bangladesh

The Sharique Programme in Bangladesh is a local governance programme that aims to empower local citizens through more democratic, transparent, inclusive and effective local government systems. A study of the programme (cited in McGee and Kroessschell 2013) shows the importance of invisible power relations shaped by gender, education, wealth, family ties and political relations in the interaction between local government institutions and citizens. Local elites have emerged as central actors in this relationship, acting as intermediaries and sometimes even attending to basic needs in the absence of government services. This study has shown that the Sharique programme's ward platforms have been able to include the local elites in spaces where they then debate public affairs jointly with other members of the community, including the concerns and needs of poorer community members. However, the study also shows that there is still a risk of elite capture within these ward platforms.

² In addition to the examples below, a number of systematic reviews of social accountability interventions in service delivery have been conducted over recent years (especially in the health and education sectors). However, none of these focus specifically on fragile settings, and hence have not been summarised here, although some do address the importance of context in understanding the effectiveness and impact of such interventions: [Enhancing community accountability, empowerment and education outcomes in low and middle-income countries: A realist review \(2014\)](#); [What is the evidence that the establishment or use of community accountability mechanisms and processes improves inclusive service delivery by governments, donors and NGOs to communities? \(2013\)](#); [Social Accountability: What are the Lessons for Improving Family Planning and Reproductive Health Programs? \(2014\)](#); [Community monitoring interventions to curb corruption and increase access and quality of service delivery in low- and middle-income countries: a systematic review \(2016\)](#); [Health provider responsiveness to social accountability initiatives in low- and middle-income countries: a realist review \(2016\)](#)

Cambodia

The World Bank financed Cambodia Demand for Good Governance (DFGG) project is an example of a social accountability intervention with trust-building at its core. The project aims to increase the extent and ability of citizens, CSOs, and other non-state actors to hold the state accountable and make it responsive to their needs, while simultaneously working with state institutions to enhance the capacity of the state to become transparent, accountable, and participatory. Critically, over time the DFGG project has built a relationship that has enabled ongoing negotiations regarding the government's social accountability policy and the establishment of a joint social accountability steering committee, in which civil society and government sit together. In one province, beneficiary monitoring of the district administration benefited from a hybrid approach of the lead CSO first supporting the district administration and later holding it to account via citizen monitoring. This sequencing worked in the context of Cambodia where levels of mistrust are high. CSOs needed to first build trust with the district administration before they could successfully carry out third party monitoring. The approach has resulted in improved performance of public officials and some sanctions being put in place, and is now being rolled out across the project (cited in Carter 2013).

Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

Tuungane, a major UK government funded Community Driven Reconstruction (CDR) Program implemented by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and CARE International in Eastern DRC, has been working since 2007 in 1,250 war-affected villages with a targeted beneficiary population of approximately 1,780,000 people. Over this period Tuungane organized the election of village committees, and training in leadership, good governance, and social inclusion. The elected committees then worked with populations to select development projects and oversee the implementation of these projects.

According to an evaluation of the programme (Humphreys et al 2012), target populations reported very high levels both of exposure to project activities and of satisfaction with the outcomes of the project. However, in terms of impact, on most measures there was no evidence that these positive experiences led to behavioural changes. In general, governance outcomes were relatively strong in both control and treatment areas (e.g. electoral procedures, transparency, leakage). There was evidence that in Tuungane areas, communities included more women on committees to manage funds, but the substantive effect was weak. There was also evidence that citizens in Tuungane areas were more likely to complain when funds were misused by leaders, suggesting some fostering of bottom up accountability. And there was some weak positive evidence for improvements in trust (particularly trust in ex-combatants, which is generally low), but no effects for other measures of within or between village cohesion.

The evaluation speculates that weak effects on governance outcomes may have resulted from the fact that existing structures were resilient and that, while behaviour may have changed temporarily to meet the conditions of development actors, more fundamental change was not being achieved. Other possibilities were that the scale of the project was too small or that the programme was pitched at the wrong level to effect change in governance structures and social cohesion (Humphreys et al 2012).

Iraq

A local governance programme in Iraq provided assistance to build the technical skills and capacity of local councils in order to win the trust of citizens and give them legitimacy. Following the initial cessation of hostilities in the country, the programme supported the creation of these councils and helped them to interact with citizens in meaningful ways. The councils conducted assessments of service needs, participated in joint planning exercises with local government departments, voiced citizens' concerns, and sought to hold officials accountable. One evaluation of the programme found that capacity building succeeded in several ways: the programme gave the councils legitimacy in the eyes of its constituents, participatory processes helped to ensure that membership on the councils was representative and minimized the risk of elite capture, and the formation of the councils led to increased trust among citizens. However, the evaluation cautioned that these gains could be lost wherever conflict continued, the legacy of government oppression remained strong, and the central government opposed decentralization (cited in Grandvoinnet et al 2015).

Liberia

An evaluation of a DFID-funded community-driven reconstruction (CDR) programme implemented by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in post-conflict northern Liberia, which aimed to improve material well-being, reinforce democratic political attitudes, and increase social cohesion, found strong evidence that the programme was successful in increasing social cohesion, some evidence that it reinforced democratic political attitudes and increased confidence in local decision making procedures, but only weak evidence that material well-being was positively affected. There was no evidence of adverse effects (Fearon et al 2008).

Mozambique

A study of the the Governance, Water and Sanitation Programme (PROGOAS) in Mozambique examined how public and social accountability can be promoted in terms of institutional capacity and legitimacy. Specifically, it looked at the constraints and opportunities encountered by “conselhos consultivos”, a recent and promising participatory institution in the country. The study concluded that PROGOAS was able advance public accountability at the local level, especially when different approaches, such as capacity building, radio programmes and local governance self-assessments, were combined and developed. However, public accountability is also influenced by other endogenous variables of local governance, such as functionality, representation, participation in decision making and power relations, which can be addressed only partially by programme activities.

Moreover, no evidence was found that an external actor such as PROGOAS can contribute in the short run to the emergence of sustainable initiatives that manifest themselves through “conselhos consultivos”. The programme can lay the foundations for local accountability, especially through capacity development and dissemination of information, but local civil society is still too fragmented, weak and aid dependent to play an autonomous role. The authors conclude that it is therefore likely that citizens will create new political spaces and adopt new forms of power only as a result of increasing decentralisation, public accountability and local development (Faehndrich and Nhantumbo 2013).

Nepal

A study of public audits in Nepal found that while the initiative was successful in creating a space for all citizens and stakeholders to openly discuss issues of concern with regard to the implementation of local infrastructure projects, accountability from the state to its citizens was hindered by the absence of locally elected bodies and the top down appointment of officials. In practice this meant that officials prioritised upward accountability, and corruption remained a problem, suggesting that some form of democratic process is essential for TAIs to be effective. The study concludes that although public audits contribute to unravelling corruption in some cases, public accountability in Nepal remains weak and public audit can only have a limited impact because it is confined to particular projects with short term timelines. Unless it is in the interest of government officials to gain the trust and confidence of citizens, accountability remains rhetoric, public services weak, and the state fragile (cited McGee and Kroessschell 2013).

6. Possible areas for future research

In order to strengthen the evidence base on the contextual dimensions of TAIs, numerous commentators have suggested promising areas for future research. While few of these relate specifically to fragile and conflict-affected settings, they do hold relevance in so far as they focus on the need to consider more carefully the kinds of political complexities and constraints which are a common feature of fragile and conflict-affected settings.

- **Applying different research methods:** Piloting new approaches to impact assessment using mixed methods to understand non-linear change and complexity (McGee and Gaventa 2010; Bukenya et al 2012), including the use of a polity-based theory of change which views social accountability as part of an historical process through which state and non-state actors forge social contracts around particular public goods over time (Joshi & Houtzager, 2012); Adopting a “causal chain” lens to unpack the dynamics of change that involve multiple actors and stages (Fox 2014). Existing initiatives could be assessed for the extent to which they travelled along the causal chain and where the roadblocks to impact lay, to inform the development of new TAIs. (Joshi 2014).
- **Conducting more comparative research:** Conducting more comparative in-depth work across contexts and initiatives (McGee and Gaventa 2010), to explore whether initiatives can travel across context, method and issue (McGee and Gaventa 2010) with a greater focus on durability and scalability of different kinds of initiatives (Joshi 2013); Identifying certain typologies of context, within which there are different possibilities for the effective implementation and success of different types of TAIs (Bukenya et al 2012).
- **Exploring incentives:** Analysing incentives for collective action on transparency and accountability with an explicit focus on power and politics, exploring issues such as why citizen groups engage in social accountability in some settings and not others, over some issues and not others, or at some points in time and not others, as well as what drives public officials and politicians to respond in some contexts and not others. (McGee and Gaventa 2010; Joshi 2013).
- **Understanding coalitions:** Building new knowledge on how to build cross-cutting accountability coalitions that link civil society actors, media, champions inside government, researchers and others (McGee and Gaventa 2010).
- **Understanding global-local linkages:** Exploring the interaction of global, national and local governance and gaining a better understanding of how TAIs fare when they target a diverse set of non-state actors, including from the private sector, both at the global and

national level (especially in sectors such as extractive industries) (McGee and Gaventa 2010; Joshi 2013); Examining the ways in which external actors, especially aid donors influence TAIs (Gaventa, email communication)

- **Understanding the role of new technologies:** Exploring the consequences of the latest generations of digital technologies (social media, internet access in remote areas, mobile telecoms) for political action (Gaventa, email communication).

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